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# Sola Scriptura and Hermeneutics: Are Adventist and Evangelical Theologies Compatible?

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## Sola Scriptura and Hermeneutics: Are Adventist and Evangelical Theologies Compatible?

Fernando Canale

### Introduction

**M**ost Adventist theologians and ministers draw feely and uncritically from evangelical theologians and pastors.<sup>1</sup> They seem to assume that Adventist and Evangelical theologies and ministerial paradigms are complementary, and form a harmonious doctrinal and ministerial whole. This assumption implies Adventist and Evangelical theologies share the same theological methodology; do they?

Theological methodology includes several components, among them, we find sources (material condition), goals (teleological condition), and

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance, Leroy Edwin Froom, *Movement of Destiny* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1971), 35; 542–43; and, George R. Knight, *The Apocalyptic Vision and the Neutering of Adventism* (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 2008), 13. A perusal through *Ministry* magazine's advertisement will show Adventists embracing Evangelical leaders in their meetings. See also, Andy Nash, "On Willow Creek," *Adventist Review* (December 18 1997): 6; and, Thomas Mostert, *Hidden Heresy? Is Spiritualism Invading Adventist Churches Today?* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2005).

hermeneutical principles (hermeneutical condition).<sup>2</sup> Hermeneutical principles and goals depend on the sources of data theologians choose to do theology. Seventh-day Adventist theology and ministry depend on the *sola-tota-prima Scriptura* (Scripture only, in all its parts, and first) principle.

In this study, I will focus on the role of Scripture (material condition) in relation to the hermeneutical principles of theological method to test the assumed compatibility of Adventist theology and ministerial paradigm with Evangelicalism in general and the Emergent Church<sup>3</sup> in particular. This methodological comparison will help us to answer the questions before us. Do Evangelical doctrines stand only on Scripture so that Adventists can continue to use them as faithful expressions of their beliefs? Alternatively, do Evangelical doctrines stand on tradition and Scripture?

Since both Adventist and Evangelical theologies claim to build on a faithful application of the *sola Scriptura* principle, we need to assess the application of the *sola Scriptura* principle in Evangelical Theology by considering the way in which the *sola Scriptura* principle and tradition relate to the hermeneutical principles of Evangelical theology. In this study, we assume that Adventist theology stands on a consistent application of the *sola Scriptura* principle.<sup>4</sup>

To determine if Adventist and Evangelical theologies understand the *sola Scriptura* principle in the same way, we will review the *sola Scriptura*

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<sup>2</sup> Fernando Canale, "Interdisciplinary Method in Christian Theology? In Search of a Working Proposal," *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 43.3 (2001): 373–74.

<sup>3</sup> The Emerging Church "began with concerns about church growth and retention of young people in a postmodern culture." Larry D. Pettergrew, "Evangelicalism, Paradigms, and the Emerging Church," *MSJ* 17.2 (2006): 165. The Emerging Church is a broad eclectic, ecumenical, and experientially minded movement taking place in Postconservative American Evangelicalism. Richard L. Mayhue, "The Emerging Church: Generous Orthodoxy or General Obfuscation?," *MSJ* 17.2 (2006): 194–203. It seeks to preach the gospel by adapting it to the postmodern culture of late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Emergent Church authors doubted Scripture and resisted its authority. They followed and built Church traditions. For a very good introduction to the Emergent Church and its main leaders see Justin Taylor, "Introduction to Postconservative Evangelicalism and the Rest of This Book," in *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times*, ed. Millard J. Erickson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 17–32. For an introduction to the notion of "emerging" as integrating evolutionary process thought and tradition see Brian D. McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy: Why I Am a Missional + Evangelical + Post / Protestant + Liberal / Conservative + Mystical / Poetic + Biblical + Charismatic / Contemplative + Fundamentalist + Calvinist + Anabaptist / Anglican + Methodist + Catholic + Green + Incarnational + Depressed - yet - Hopeful + Emergent + Unfinished Christian* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 275–88.

<sup>4</sup> This assumption stands on the claim Adventists make in their first Fundamental Belief. An independent study should assess the veracity of this assumption in the practice of Adventist theology and ministry.

principle first in relation to the material principle of theological method. We will start (1) considering the Adventist belief that Evangelical theology actually abides by the *sola Scriptura* principle; and, (2) the influential positive picture of Luther Ellen White drew in her writings. Next, we will analyze some declarations on *sola Scriptura* (3) by Luther, and, (4) Luther's dependence on Augustine. Then, we will survey (5) Evangelical representative statements of Faith; (6) John Wesley's methodological use of Scripture; and, (7) the contemporary Evangelical turn to tradition. Finally, we will recognize (8) the two levels in which Evangelical believers experience the role of Scripture.

The analysis that follows is elementary and by no means exhaustive. Yet, it may help Adventists to evaluate their assumptions about the Evangelical claim and use of the *sola Scriptura* principle in their theological constructions and ministerial paradigms.

### **Adventism's View on Sola Scriptura**

While Seventh-day Adventist Fundamental Beliefs start with the implicit affirmation of the *tota* and *prima Scriptura* principles, it falls short from articulating the *sola Scriptura* principle.

The Holy Scriptures, Old and New Testaments, are the written Word of God [tota Scriptura], given by divine inspiration through holy men of God who spoke and wrote as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. In this Word, God has committed to man the knowledge necessary for Salvation. The Holy Scriptures are the infallible revelation of His will. They are the standard of character, the test of experience, the authoritative revealer of doctrines, and the trustworthy record of God's acts in history [prima Scriptura]. (2 Peter 1:20, 21; 2 Tim. 3:16, 17; Ps. 119:105; Prov. 30:5, 6; Isa. 8:20; John 17:17; 1 Thess. 2:13; Heb. 4:12.).<sup>5</sup>

Some Adventist Scholars, however, clearly affirm and articulate the *sola Scriptura* principle. According to Peter van Bemmelen, "no other holy books, sacred histories, ancient traditions, ecclesiastical pronouncements, or creedal statements may be accorded authority equal to that of the Bible. This also means that conscience, reason, feelings, and religious or mystical experiences

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<sup>5</sup> General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, *Church Manual*, 17th ed. (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 2005), 9.

are subordinate to the authority of Scripture. These may have a legitimate sphere, but they should constantly be brought under the scrutiny of the Word of God (Heb. 4:12).<sup>6</sup> Since biblical prophets taught and lived by *sola Scriptura* principle, we should not consider it a modern category imposed on Scripture but the cognitive principle given by God to the biblical writers.<sup>7</sup> *Tota*,<sup>8</sup> and *prima Scriptura*<sup>9</sup> principles are also recognized by Adventist scholarship.

Adventists readily and correctly recognize that the *sola Scriptura* principle originates with Luther and the early reformation movement. Accordingly, they believe that Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, and the Anabaptists “consistently upheld the Bible and the Bible alone as the standard of truth and sought to utilize Scripture, instead of tradition or scholastic philosophy, to interpret Scripture.”<sup>10</sup> Moreover, Adventists believe that Reformers developed their theologies by applying Bible knowledge as the only and final norm for truth. *Sola Scriptura*, means that “all other sources of knowledge must be tested by this unerring standard.”<sup>11</sup>

However, Peter van Bemmelen correctly warned us about assuming Evangelical theologians follow their claim to *sola Scriptura* in their teachings. “The *sola scriptura* principle is as much in danger of opposition now as at any time in the past. Through exalting the authority of human

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<sup>6</sup> Peter Maarten van Bemmelen, “Revelation and Inspiration,” in *Handbook of Seventh-Day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen, Commentary Reference Series 12 (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 2000), 42.

<sup>7</sup> On the biblical nature of the *sola Scriptura* principle in Adventism see, Richard M. Davidson, “Biblical Interpretation,” in *Handbook of Seventh-Day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen, Commentary Reference Series 12 (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 2000), 60.

<sup>8</sup> “All Scripture—not just part—is inspired by God. This certainly includes the whole OT, the canonical Scriptures of the apostolic church (see Luke 24:44, 45; John 5:39; Rom. 1:2; 3:2; 2 Peter 1:21). But for Paul it also includes the NT sacred writings as well. Paul’s use of the word ‘scripture’ (*graphē*, ‘writing’) in 1 Timothy 5:18 points in this direction. He introduces two quotations with the words ‘scripture says’: one from Deuteronomy 25:4 and one from the words of Jesus in Luke 10:7. The word ‘scripture’ thus is used to refer to both the OT and the Gospel of Luke. Peter, by noting that some ignorant people ‘twist’ Paul’s writings ‘as they do the other Scriptures’ (2 Peter 3:15, 16), puts the apostle’s writings into the category of Scripture. Thus the Gospels and the Epistles of Paul are understood as ‘Scripture’ already in NT times.” Ibid., 61.

<sup>9</sup> “Scripture thus provides the framework, the divine perspective, the foundational principles, for every branch of knowledge and experience. All additional knowledge, experience, or revelation must build upon and remain faithful to the all-sufficient foundation of Scripture.” Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 61.

reason, tradition, and science, many have come to deny or to limit the authority of Scripture.”<sup>12</sup>

### Ellen White on Luther’s Sola Scriptura

Ellen White’s high praise for Luther’s application of the “Bible only” principle against Roman Catholic theology and tradition may be one of the reasons why Adventists generally assume that Protestant theology generates from the faithful and consistent application of the *sola Scriptura* principle.

For instance, Ellen White explained, “When enemies appealed to custom and tradition, or to the assertions and authority of the pope, Luther met them with the Bible, and the Bible only.”<sup>13</sup> Besides, “God had a work for him to do, and angels of Heaven were sent to protect him.”<sup>14</sup> Moreover, many “received from Luther the precious light.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, Luther is “a champion of the truth, fighting not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, and powers, and spiritual wickedness in high places.”<sup>16</sup> Notably, Luther advocacy of biblical truth notably includes justification by faith.<sup>17</sup>

Yet, is her correct description of Luther’s pivotal role in the Great Controversy an endorsement of his theology? The answer to this question is no. Although Ellen White chose to underline the many positive contributions of Luther to the Great Controversy, she did not expect Luther and the Reformers to be free from all errors. According to Ellen White their role was “to break the fetters of Rome, and to give the Bible to the world; yet there were important truths which they failed to discover, and grave errors which they did not renounce.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> van Bemmelen, “Revelation and Inspiration,” 43.

<sup>13</sup> Ellen White, *The Great Controversy between Christ and Satan* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1907), 132.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> “Nothing but repentance toward God and faith in Christ can save the sinner. The grace of Christ cannot be purchased. It is a free gift. He [Luther] counsels the people not to buy the indulgences, but to look in faith to their crucified Redeemer. He relates his own painful experience in vainly seeking by humiliation and penance to secure salvation, and assures his hearers that it was by looking away from himself and believing in Christ that he found peace and joy unspeakable. He urges them to obtain, if possible, a copy of the Bible, and to study it diligently. It is those who do not learn and obey its sacred truths that are deceived by Satan, and left to perish in their iniquity.” Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ellen White, *Signs of the Times* (June 14, 1883): 7

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> “Luther and his co-laborers accomplished a noble work for God; but, coming as they did from the Roman Church, having themselves believed and advocated her doctrines, it was not to be expected that they would discern all these errors. It was their work to break the fetters of Rome, and to give the Bible to the world; yet there were important truths which they failed to

Furthermore, according to Ellen White, “the Protestants of the nineteenth century” were “fast approaching the Catholics in their infidelity concerning the Scriptures.” Because Protestants found “difficult to prove their doctrines from the Bible,” they were beginning to look to Rome with much favor. Their failure to apply the *sola Scriptura* principle would lead Protestantism to change its theology and eventually to union with Rome.<sup>19</sup>

The Protestant lack of success in applying the *sola Scriptura* principle calls for the mission of the Emerging Remnant: “God will have a people upon the earth to maintain the Bible, and the Bible only, as the standard of all doctrines and the basis of all reforms.”<sup>20</sup>

Did Luther follow consistently the *sola Scriptura* principle? Do Evangelical theologians follow the *sola Scriptura* principle in the twenty first century?

### Luther’s Ambiguity on Sola Scriptura

Although Luther affirmed the *sola Scriptura* principle, he understood it and applied in a limited and ambiguous way. According to Luther Scripture is “clearer, simpler, and more reliable than any other writings.” This fact determines that “Scripture alone is the true lord and master of all writings

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discover, and grave errors which they did not renounce.” Ellen White, *The Spirit of Prophecy*. 4 vols. 1870–1884 (Battle Creek, MI: Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association, 1969), 4: 180.

<sup>19</sup> “And this [Roman Catholicism] is the religion which Protestants are beginning to look upon with so much favor, and which will eventually be united with Protestantism. This union will not, however, be effected by a change in Catholicism; for Rome never changes. She claims infallibility. It is Protestantism that will change. The adoption of liberal ideas on its part will bring it where it can clasp the hand of Catholicism. ‘The Bible, the Bible, is the foundation of our faith’, was the cry of Protestants in Luther’s time, while the Catholics cried, ‘The Fathers, custom, tradition’. Now many Protestants find it difficult to prove their doctrines from the Bible, and yet they have not the moral courage to accept the truth which involves a cross; therefore they are fast coming to the ground of Catholics, and, using the best arguments they have to evade the truth, cite the testimony of the Fathers, and the customs and precepts of men. Yes, the Protestants of the nineteenth century are fast approaching the Catholics in their infidelity concerning the Scriptures. But there is just as wide a gulf today between Rome and the Protestantism of Luther, Cranmer, Ridley, Hooper, and the noble army of martyrs, as there was when these men made the protest which gave them the name of Protestants.” *Review and Herald* (June 1, 1886): 13.

<sup>20</sup> “But God will have a people upon the earth to maintain the Bible, and the Bible only, as the standard of all doctrines, and the basis of all reforms. The opinions of learned men, the deductions of science, the creeds or decisions of ecclesiastical councils, as numerous and discordant as are the churches which they represent, the voice of the majority—not one nor all of these should be regarded as evidence for or against any point of religious faith. Before accepting any doctrine or precept, we should demand a plain ‘Thus saith the Lord’ in its support.” White, *Great Controversy*, 595.

and doctrine on earth.”<sup>21</sup> In practice, this meant that Protestant theologians were “willing to fight each other, not by appealing to the authority of any doctor, but by that of Scripture alone.”<sup>22</sup> These pointed statements clearly outline the *sola Scriptura* principle. Hence, we can see why many Evangelical and Adventists authors believe Luther applied it in his theological writings.<sup>23</sup> Yet, a closer look shows Luther was ambiguous and inconsistent in the application of the *sola Scriptura* principle.<sup>24</sup>

The clarity of Scripture led Luther to believe not only that Scripture stands *alone* over against human tradition, but also that Scripture stands *beyond* human interpretation.<sup>25</sup> In pre-postmodern times, Luther was unaware that nothing stands beyond interpretation.<sup>26</sup> In postmodern times, Luther’s conviction that “the pure Scriptures alone ... teach nothing but Christ so that we may attain piety through him in faith”<sup>27</sup> runs against the clarity and manifoldness of Scripture.

It also reveals Luther’s application of justification by faith as his macro hermeneutical presupposition for biblical interpretation and theological construction. Luther explicitly explained how his understanding and experience of justification by faith opened “a totally other face of the entire Scripture... Armed more fully with these thoughts [justification by faith], I began a second time to interpret the Psalter.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> “Holy Scripture must necessarily be clearer, simpler, and more reliable than any other writings. Especially since all teachers verify their own statements through the Scriptures as clearer and more reliable writings, and desire their own writings to be confirmed and explained by them. But nobody can ever substantiate an obscure saying by one that is more obscure; therefore, necessity forces us to run to the Bible with the writings of all teachers, and to obtain there a verdict and judgment upon them. Scripture alone is the true lord and master of all writings and doctrine on earth.” Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald and Helmut T. Lehmann, *Luther’s Works* (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia, 1999), 32:11.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 33:167.

<sup>23</sup> David S. Dockery, *Christian Scripture: An Evangelical Perspective on Inspiration, Authority and Interpretation* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 131.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> “Thus the opponent, overcome by the bright light, must see and confess that God’s sayings stand alone and need no human interpretation. The foe who does not believe clear Scripture will certainly not believe the glosses of any of the fathers either.” Luther, *Luther’s Works*, 39:165.

<sup>26</sup> “Interpretation seems a minor matter, but it is not. Every time we act, deliberate, judge, understand, or even experience, we are interpreting. To understand at all is to interpret.” David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1987), 9.

<sup>27</sup> Luther, *Luther’s Works*, 52:173.

<sup>28</sup> “There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God



Luther's understanding and use of justification by faith led him not only to conclude that Christ was the only content of his "Scripture alone," but also to create his own canon of Scripture. According to Luther, only books that lead us to Christ should be in the canon. "In a word St. John's Gospel and his first epistle, St. Paul's epistles, especially Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians, and St. Peter's first epistle are the books that show you Christ and teach you all that is necessary and salvatory for you to know, even if you were never to see or hear any other book or doctrine. Therefore St. James' epistle is really an epistle of straw, compared to these others, for it has nothing of the nature of the gospel about it."<sup>29</sup>

Evidently, Luther's "Scripture only" modifies the scope of Scripture by discarding the "*tota Scriptura*" principle. In practice, the real "battle cry of the Reformation" is "Christ/Grace alone."

How can the affirmation of the *sola Scriptura* principle turn against Scripture and create a small canon of New Testament books? Adventist and Evangelicals claiming to follow Luther's *sola Scriptura* principle need to understand why Luther came to his macro hermeneutical perspective and the canon within the canon view of Scripture.<sup>30</sup>

Clearly, Luther's interpretation of Christ and the "Gospel" does not come from Scripture alone. If not from Scripture alone, whence does it come?

According to Luther, not only Scripture leads to Christ but also Philosophy, the Fathers, and specially Augustine. Let us consider briefly how Luther viewed the role of Philosophy and Tradition in biblical interpretation and theological construction.

Luther believed that philosophy belongs to the realm of nature and theology to the realm of grace (supernature) where theology has

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justifies us by faith, as it is written, 'He who through faith is righteous shall live.' Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. There a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me. . . . Armed more fully with these thoughts, I began a second time to interpret the Psalter." Luther, *Luther's Works*, 34:337.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 35:362.

<sup>30</sup> Luther "applied what became known as the Christocentric principle. His key phrase was 'what manifest Christ' (*was Christum treibet*). What began as a laudable enterprise to see how Scripture points, urges, drives to Christ became dangerous as Luther came to the conclusion that not all Scripture did drive to Christ. This led him to consider some parts of Scripture as less important than others. Accompanying the Christocentric principle was a fourth: dualism between letter and spirit (law and gospel, works and grace). Much of the OT was seen as letter and much of the NT as spirit, although not all in the NT was gospel nor all in the OT was law. Both of these last two principles deny the principle of the totality of Scripture (*tota scriptura*) and lead to subjectivism. The interpreter's own experience ultimately becomes the norm." Davidson, "Biblical Interpretation," 89.

preeminence.<sup>31</sup> For this reason, he was critical of philosophy's contributions to theological issues. Thus, Luther believed that what Neoplatonic philosophers say about theological matters (supernature) in the realm of nature they stole from the Gospel of John and the fathers but falsified by mixing them with philosophical thoughts.<sup>32</sup> Yet, because it belongs to nature, "philosophy leads to Christ."<sup>33</sup>

Luther, however, did not perceive that metaphysics determined his view of grace as supernature, and consequently, determined his understanding of the Gospel as divine event. Luther uncritically adopted Greek ontological principles via his use of the fathers, notably Augustine.

Because the fathers introduce subtle errors difficult to recognize, Luther correctly advised that we should judge them from "Scripture alone."<sup>34</sup> Moreover, we should not use the fathers to throw light on Scripture "but rather to set forth the clear Scriptures and so to prove Scripture with Scripture alone, without adding any of their own thoughts."<sup>35</sup> Yet, Luther accepted that we use the fathers to introduce ourselves to "Scripture alone." As philosophy, then, the fathers (tradition) also lead us to Scripture.<sup>36</sup>

### Luther and Augustine

Luther stands on Augustine's shoulder. For him, Augustine was the greatest of all the fathers. "No teacher of the church—explains Luther—

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<sup>31</sup> According to Martin E. Lehmann, Luther "maintained that theological concepts often have a different meaning in philosophy. The road to understanding the incarnation was blocked for philosophy because it taught the way of the law and the meritorious character of works. In its own sphere, however, Luther conceded that philosophy had its independent meaning and was qualified to set forth the truth in the realm of nature. In the realm of grace, however, theology was to hold sway." Luther, *Luther's Works*, 38:238.

<sup>32</sup> "The Platonic philosophers have stolen much from the fathers and the Gospel of John, as Augustine says that he found almost everything in Plato which is in the first chapter of John. Therefore, those things which the philosophers say about these ecclesiastical matters have been stolen, so that a Platonist teaches the Trinity of things as (1) the maker, (2) the prototype or exemplar, (3) and compassion; but they have mixed philosophical thoughts with one another and have falsified them." *Ibid.*, 38: 276.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> "For if you do not look to the Scriptures alone, the lives of the saints are ten times more harmful, dangerous, and offensive than those of the impious. For the wicked sin gravely and their sins are easily recognizable and must be avoided. But the saints present a subtle and fine show with their human doctrines and this is likely to lead astray even the elect as Christ says, in Matthew 24[:24]." *Ibid.*, 52: 191.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 52: 176.

<sup>36</sup> "One should not use the fathers' teachings for anything more than to get into Scripture as they did, and then one should remain with Scripture alone. But Emser thinks that they should have a special function alongside the Scriptures, as if Scripture were not enough for teaching us." *Ibid.*, 39: 167.

taught better than Augustine... It would be too bad if we did not have Augustine; then the other church fathers would leave us in the lurch terribly. Augustine taught and guided us better than the pope with all his decretals. He leads me to Christ, not away from Him.”<sup>37</sup>

Not surprisingly, Luther based his hermeneutics and theology squarely on Augustine’s teachings. In so doing, the reformer was following the *sola Scriptura* principle he found in Augustine. According to Luther, Augustine was “the first and almost the only one who determined to be subject to the Holy Scriptures alone, and independent of the books of all the fathers and saints.”<sup>38</sup> As proof, Luther quoted Augustine’s explanation of the way he applied the *sola Scriptura* principle to the fathers: “I have learned to hold the Scriptures alone inerrant. Therefore I read all the others, as holy and learned as they may be, with the reservation that I regard their teaching true only if they can prove their statements through Scripture or reason.”<sup>39</sup> The last two words in the last quote, “or reason,” reveal that in spite of their claims to follow the *sola Scriptura* principle, neither Augustine nor Luther consistently applied it. Together with Scripture, reason also plays a foundational role in theological hermeneutics, method, and theological construction.

In theological matters, Luther also put Scripture on the same plane with tradition. We can see Luther’s ambiguous use of the *sola Scriptura* principle also when he shared his personal experience with Scripture and tradition. “No book—affirms Luther—except the Bible and St. Augustine” had come to his attention “from which I have learned more about God, Christ, man, and all things.”<sup>40</sup>

As “Augustinian Doctor,” Luther naively and incorrectly thought Augustine applied the *sola Scriptura* principle in his biblical interpretation and theological writings. The Roman Catholic Church considers Augustine a saint and a doctor of the church. He was instrumental in consolidating the merging of philosophical and biblical ideas on which the Roman Catholic theological system stands.<sup>41</sup> By following the theological lead of Augustine,

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<sup>37</sup> Luther, *Luther's Works*, 22: 512.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 34: 285.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 41: 25.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 31: 75.

<sup>41</sup> “One of the decisive developments in the western philosophical tradition was the eventually widespread merging of the Greek philosophical tradition and the Judeo-Christian religious and scriptural traditions.... Augustine is not only one of the major sources whereby classical philosophy in general and Neoplatonism in particular enter into the mainstream of

Luther's thought stands on the same Roman Catholic philosophical principles and theological system.<sup>42</sup> Following Luther, Protestantism, and American Evangelicalism stand on the same foundation. Not surprisingly, the "emerging" of the twenty-first century Emerging Church movement, springs from tradition and its Neoplatonic metaphysical foundation.

Luther's affirmation of the *sola Scriptura* principle is ambiguous. On one hand, he gives Scripture a unique place and role among all other writings. Scripture, he contended, is clear and stands beyond interpretation. Consequently, we should use Scripture to judge all other writings, and read Scripture rather than theological treatises, even his own writings.<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, Luther greatly qualified the contents of Scripture and its methodological role as source of theological knowledge. Thus, by Scripture Luther did not mean the whole Old and New Testaments writings but mainly Paul's letters. Moreover, in practice, he used Augustine (tradition), and reason, to judge the fathers and interpret Scripture (cannon within the cannon).

Although Luther did not apply the *sola Scriptura* principle consistently, we must recognize his sincerity and personal courage in its formulation and application, as Ellen White frequently did in his writings. More importantly, his affirmation of the *sola Scriptura* principle unleashed a theological revolution that has not reached its climax yet. Finally, we need to understand that Adventism as the Emerging Remnant stands on Luther's affirmation of the *sola Scriptura* principle, not on his theological formulations or their implicit philosophical foundations.

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early and subsequent medieval philosophy, but there are significant contributions of his own that emerge from his modification of that Greco-Roman inheritance, e.g., his subtle accounts of belief and authority, his account of knowledge and illumination, his emphasis upon the importance and centrality of the will, and his focus upon a new way of conceptualizing the phenomena of human history, just to cite a few of the more conspicuous examples." <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/augustine/>.

<sup>42</sup> "The decisive role in the formulation of Luther's theology was played by St. Paul and Augustinianism. . . . Luther was, indeed (at least concerning the basic tenets of justification), a spiritual son of the bishop of Hippo and of the 'Doctor Angelicus'." Norman Geisler, Ralph E. MacKenzie, *Roman Catholics and Evangelicals Together: Agreements and Disagreements* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1995), 96, 99.

<sup>43</sup> "I'd rather that all my books would disappear and the Holy Scriptures alone would be read. Otherwise we'll rely on such writings and let the Bible go. Brenz wrote such a big commentary on twelve chapters of Luke that it disgusts the reader to look into it. The same is true of my commentary on Galatians. I wonder who encourages this mania for writing! Who wants to buy such stout tomes? And if they're bought, who'll read them? And if they're read, who'll be edified by them?" Luther, *Luther's Works*, 54: 311.

### Protestant Creeds on *Sola Scriptura*

Let us consider briefly some doctrinal statements on the *sola Scriptura* principle in the Calvinist (Belgic Confession, 1561; and, Canons of Dort, 1618–1619), and Lutheran (Formula of Concord, 1575–1577) traditions.

According to the Belgic confession, Scriptures are *sufficient to be the only rule of faith*. They fully and sufficiently contain the will of God, all that we need to believe for salvation.<sup>44</sup> No human writing (customs, councils, decrees or statutes), is of equal value with the truth of God. “Therefore we reject with all our hearts whatsoever does not agree with this infallible rule, as the apostles have taught us, saying, Prove the spirits, whether they are of God.”<sup>45</sup> Thus, the Belgic Confession affirms the *sola Scriptura* principle.

The Synod of Dort exhorts “all their brethren in the gospel of Christ ... to regulate, by the Scripture, according to the analogy of faith, not only their sentiments, but also their language, and to abstain from all those phrases which exceed the limits necessary to be observed in ascertaining the genuine sense of the Holy Scripture.”<sup>46</sup> Thus, while the Canons of Dort give a high place to Scripture they fall short from affirming the *sola Scriptura* principle.

The Formula of Concord “confess[es] that the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments are the only rule and norm according to which all doctrines and teachers alike must be appraised and judged.”<sup>47</sup> This affirmation of the *sola Scriptura* principle, however, leaves room for the role of ancient official catholic tradition as a help to combat heresies. “The ancient church formulated symbols (that is, brief and explicit confessions) which were accepted as the unanimous, catholic, Christian faith and confessions of the orthodox and true church, namely, the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed. We pledge ourselves to these, and we hereby reject all heresies and teachings which have been introduced into the church of God contrary to them.”<sup>48</sup>

After conceding the role of tradition in theological matters, the Formula of Concord cautions: “Other writings of ancient and modern teachers,

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<sup>44</sup> “The Belgic Confession” (1561), in *Historic Creeds and Confessions*, electronic ed. (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1997), Article. 12.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, Article. 12.

<sup>46</sup> The Canons of Dort, (1618–1619) in *Historic Creeds and Confessions*, electronic ed. (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), conclusion.

<sup>47</sup> Theodore G. Tappert, ed. “Formula of Concord” (1575–1577) in *The Book of Concord : The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 2000, c1959), 464; emphasis mine.

<sup>48</sup> Tappert, “Formula of Concord,” 464.

whatever their names, should not be put on a par with Holy Scripture. Every single one of them should be subordinated to the Scriptures and should be received in no other way and no further than as witnesses to the fashion in which the doctrine of the prophets and apostles was preserved in post-apostolic times.”

The Formula even goes further to explain that tradition does not judge Scripture but Scripture judges tradition. Tradition merely witness and explain of the way in which early generations of Christian interpreted Scripture and understood controversial doctrines.<sup>49</sup> In practice, however, the role of tradition calls for the multiplicity of theological sources and grows from the Roman Catholic methodological paradigm.<sup>50</sup>

Although the Formula of Concord presents a more nuanced and detailed affirmation of the *sola Scriptura* principle than the Belgic Confession and the Canons of Dort, it also explains in more detail the role of tradition as a complementary source of theological data to be used in conjunction with Scripture.

The partial review of evidence presented so far explains the fact that while mainline reformers embraced of the *Sola Scriptura* principle they held the patristic writers in high esteem. “Quite simply,—explained Alister McGrath—the mainline reformers believed the bible had been honored, interpreted, and applied faithfully in the past and that they were under *an obligation to take past reflections into account* as they developed their own.”<sup>51</sup> In practice, the “Bible only” became the “Bible and tradition.” McGrath unpacked the way in which Evangelicals today retrieve, relate, and use the mainline reformers’ view on Scripture’s relation to tradition. “The

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<sup>49</sup> “In this way the distinction between the Holy Scripture of the Old and New Testaments and all other writings is maintained, and Holy Scripture remains the only judge, rule, and norm according to which as the only touchstone all doctrines should and must be understood and judged as good or evil, right or wrong. Other symbols and other writings are not judges like Holy Scripture, but merely witnesses and expositions of the faith, setting forth how at various times the Holy Scriptures were understood by contemporaries in the church of God with reference to controverted articles, and how contrary teachings were rejected and condemned.” Tappert, “Formula of Concord,” 465.

<sup>50</sup> For instance, when discussing the issue of love and the keeping of the law the Formula of Concord uses the plurality of sources approach: “But later we shall assemble more testimonies on this subject, though they are obvious throughout not only the Scriptures but also the holy Fathers.” Theodore G. Tappert, “The Apology of the Augsburg Confession,” (1531) in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 2000, c1959), 130.

<sup>51</sup> Alister McGrath, “Engaging the Great Tradition: Evangelical Theology and the Role of Tradition,” in *Evangelical Futures: A Conversation on Theological Method*, ed. John G. Stackhouse, Jr. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), 144, emphasis added.

magisterial Reformation thus offer and approach to engaging with the ‘great tradition’ that has immense potential for their evangelical progeny today. Theology is not simply about giving priority to the Bible; it is about valuing and engaging with those in the past who gave priority to the Bible, and valuing and interacting with the ideas their derived from that engagement.”<sup>52</sup>

In conclusion, the *sola Scriptura* principle, as presented so far in Luther, the Belgic Confession, the Canons of Dort, and the Formula of Concord, speak about the role of Scripture and its relation to Christian tradition in four ways. First, Scripture’s clarity and sufficiency became the basis from which Protestants criticized and tested the writings of church fathers and theologians (methodological deconstructionism). Second, the fathers that passed the critical test of Scripture became useful sources for understanding Scripture, constructing Christian teachings, and facing heresies (multiplicity of theological sources). Third, tradition *de facto* became the hermeneutical context from which Reformers interpreted Scripture and constructed their teachings and practices.<sup>53</sup> Forth, as mainline reformers fell short from explicitly applying the *sola Scriptura* principle to the philosophical or scientific ideas assumed in the writings of the early fathers, their hermeneutical principles implicitly flow from Greek philosophical thinking.

We cannot overemphasize the importance of this oversight. Luther was wrong when he assumed Scripture is beyond interpretation. The biblical interpretation and theological construction of the fathers and all theologians stands on metaphysical ontological and cosmological presuppositions the fathers and most theologians after them took from non-biblical sources. Failure to subject the fathers’ philosophical assumptions to biblical criticism becomes the point on which the *sola Scriptura* principle stands or falls.

These findings should help Adventist and Biblically grounded Evangelicals to realize that the Protestant Reformation was not about restoring biblical thinking but about restoring “the ancient catholicity of the church.”<sup>54</sup> Tradition is the ground from which the Emerging Church emerges.

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<sup>52</sup> McGrath, “Engaging the Great Tradition,” 144.

<sup>53</sup> “The Reformers’ appeal to Scripture sufficiency was crafted on the assumption that the Bible was the book of the church’s faith. That faith of the church, New Testament and Patristic, was seen as contiguous with the biblical narrative, so that *the only proper way to read the Bible was within the framework of the church’s teaching and practice*.” D. H. Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism: A Primer for Suspicious Protestants* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 200, emphasis provided.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

As a forgotten task, the Biblical Reformation of the Church lies still in the future. Scripture is the ground from which the Emerging Remnant emerges.

### John Wesley on Sola Scriptura

When looking back to the complex history of Protestantism, Adventists in general feel closer to the Arminian than to the Calvinistic Lutheran tradition. John Wesley has captured the imagination of many Adventists. I had teachers who led us young students to believe John Wesley was right in all his teachings, and wrong only regarding the Adventist distinctive doctrines. Surely, then, John Wesley must have stood squarely on the *sola Scriptura* principle. Let us review briefly how Wesley related to the material and hermeneutical principles of theological method. On the material principle, we will focus on John Wesley's view of Scripture and tradition. On the hermeneutical principle, we will focus on his view on God's and human realities.

As the mainline reformers, John Wesley had Scripture in high regard. "My ground is the Bible. Yea, I am a Bible-bigot. I follow it in all things, both great and small."<sup>55</sup> This seems to be a concise statement affirming Scripture's clarity, sufficiency and even the *sola Scriptura* principle. Moreover, Wesley believed Scripture was completely inerrant.<sup>56</sup> He went on to state the *sola Scriptura* principle as his commitment "to study (comparatively) no book but the Bible."<sup>57</sup> The "comparatively," in parentheses above, introduces ambiguity in an otherwise tight statement. In other words, at the center of his commitment to study only one book, Wesley told us he also studied other books. This opens the question to the way in which Wesley understood the relationship of Scripture with tradition.

Methodists, explained Wesley, "desire and design to be downright Bible-Christians; taking the Bible, as interpreted by the primitive Church and our own, for their whole and sole rule."<sup>58</sup> Consequently, Methodism is not something new but "the old religion, the religion of the Bible, the religion of the primitive Church, the religion of the Church of England."<sup>59</sup> John Wesley,

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<sup>55</sup> John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, 3 ed., 14 vols. (Albany, OR: Ages, 1872), 3: 240.

<sup>56</sup> "Nay, if there be any mistakes in the Bible, there may as well be a thousand. If there be one falsehood in that book, it did not come from the God of truth." Ibid., 4: 88.

<sup>57</sup> "In 1730 I began to be *homo unius libri* to study (comparatively) no book but the Bible." Ibid., 3:197.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 8: 387.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 7: 448.



then, identified tradition with the primitive church and the Church of England. Making explicit what Luther denied but implicitly embraced, Wesley took for granted tradition guiding role in the interpretation of Scripture. Moreover, tradition plays its hermeneutical role not only in theological but also in devotional matters of the heart.<sup>60</sup>

Wesley seemed to distinguish between the “bad” tradition of Roman Catholicism<sup>61</sup> and the “good” tradition of the early fathers of the universal Church (Patristic).<sup>62</sup> This distinction is misleading. A better way to categorize patristic and scholastic traditions would be “general” and “detailed.” In other words, early fathers, notably Augustine, worked on the same methodological and hermeneutical principles as later fathers like Thomas Aquinas whom most protestant like to reject off hand. From the methodological perspective of analysis, we follow in this study, both patristic and scholastic traditions stem from the same non-biblical neo-platonic philosophical principles. Consequently, in spite of Luther’s and Wesley’s claims to the *sola Scriptura* principle, their failure to apply it to the philosophical presuppositions of the fathers led them to transgress in practice the very principle they committed themselves, in theory, to follow.

Let us turn our attention to some choice hermeneutical principles operating in Wesley’s thinking. Are there practical consequences for

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<sup>60</sup> “Our common way of living was this: From four in the morning till five, each of us used private prayer. From five to seven we read the Bible together, carefully comparing it (that we might not lean to our own understandings) with the writings of the earliest ages.” Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, 1: 31.

<sup>61</sup> “Persons may be quite right in their opinions, and yet have no religion at all; and, on the other hand, persons may be truly religious, who hold many wrong opinions. Can anyone possibly doubt of this, while there are Romanists in the world? For who can deny, not only that many of them formerly have been truly religious, as Thomas à Kempis, Gregory Lopes, and the Marquis de Renty; but that many of them, even at this day, are real inward Christians? And yet what a heap of erroneous opinions do they hold, delivered by tradition from their fathers! Nay, who can doubt of it while there are Calvinists in the world, — asserters of absolute predestination?” Ibid., 6: 215.

<sup>62</sup> Consider for instance the following statement: “So true is that well known saying of the ancient Fathers: *Fecisti nos ad to; et irrequietum est cor nostrum, donec requiescat in to*. ‘Thou hast made us for thyself; and our heart cannot rest, till it resteth in thee.’” Ibid., 7: 288. C.f. Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, 5: 408. Thomas Oden, a Wesleyan Methodist theologian, grounded his Vincentian/postmodern Theological Method to overcome on this distinction. For an introduction to Oden’s method see, Kwabena Donkor, *Tradition, Method, and Contemporary Protestant Theology: An Analysis of Thomas C. Oden’s Vincentian Method* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2003). Oden’s method is also followed in the Ancient/Future approach to ministry and liturgy in the Emergent Church movement of younger evangelicals. See for instance, Robert E. Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals: Facing the Challenges of the New World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002); Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999).

transgressing the *sola Scriptura* principle? Yes, there are many. Some of them affect the way Wesley implicitly or explicitly understood some basic hermeneutical principles. For instance, John Wesley's view of heaven, soul, and spirituality built on Augustine's philosophical appropriation of Greek ontology. Although Wesley's reading of the Bible led him to conceive God's eternity as temporal duration rather than timelessness, he still understood reality according to the Neoplatonic view of heaven and earth, matter and spirit.

On the one hand, following Scripture, Wesley described eternity as infinite temporal duration<sup>63</sup> and assumed God created the universe within his eternal time.<sup>64</sup> He also conceived God as intently spatial.<sup>65</sup> Yet, showing his dependence on Augustine, Wesley hinted the possibility that the time of infinite duration may not move at all, and so, be timeless.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, following tradition, Wesley assumed the existence of an ontological dichotomy between time and eternity,<sup>67</sup> the visible and the invisible worlds,<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> "Now, what a poor pittance of duration is this, compared to the life of Methuselah! 'And Methuselah lived nine hundred and sixty and nine years.' But what are these nine hundred and sixty and nine years to the duration of an angel, which began 'or ever the mountains were brought forth,' or the foundations of the earth were laid? And what is the duration which has passed since the creation of angels, to that which passed before they were created, to unbeginning eternity? — to that half of eternity (if one may so speak) which had then elapsed?" Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, 7: 187.

<sup>64</sup> "He began his creation at what time, or rather, at what part of eternity, it seemed him good. Had it pleased him, it might have been millions of years sooner, or millions of ages later." *Ibid.*, 10: 408.

<sup>65</sup> "Nearly allied to the eternity of God, is his omnipresence. As he exists through infinite duration, so he cannot but exist through infinite space; according to his own question, equivalent, to the strongest assertion, — 'Do not I fill heaven and earth? Saith the Lord;' (heaven and earth, in the Hebrew idiom, implying the whole universe;) which, therefore, according to his own declaration, is filled with his presence." *Ibid.*, 7: 286.

<sup>66</sup> "But this is only speaking after the manner of men: For the measures of long and short are only applicable to time which admits of bounds, and not to unbounded duration. This rolls on (according to our low conceptions) with unutterable, inconceivable swiftness; if one would not rather say, it does not roll or move at all, but is one still immovable ocean. For the inhabitants of heaven "rest not day and night," but continually cry, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord, the God, the Almighty, who was, and who is, and who is to come!" And when millions of millions of ages are elapsed, their eternity is but just begun." *Ibid.*, 6: 209–10.

<sup>67</sup> "Of what importance is it to be continually sensible of the condition wherein we stand! How advisable, by every possible means, to connect the ideas of time and eternity! so to associate them together, that the thought of one may never recur to your mind, without the thought of the other! It is our highest wisdom to associate the ideas of the visible and invisible world; to connect temporal and Spiritual, mortal and immortal being. Indeed, in our common dreams we do not usually know we are asleep whilst we are in the midst of our dream. As neither do we know it while we are in the midst of the dream which we call life. But you may be conscious of it now. God grant you may, before you awake in a winding-sheet of fire!" *Ibid.*, 7: 346.

(earth and heaven), mater and spirit, and the soul and the body.<sup>69</sup>

Implicitly embracing Neoplatonic ontology, Wesley believed that heaven and the spiritual life are not material realities different and independent from the materiality and flesh of our bodily spatiotemporal existence that ends at death.<sup>70</sup>

Do these hermeneutical principles matter? Do they relate to salvation? They do. According to Wesley, we experience the big chasm between heaven and earth at death.<sup>71</sup> Wesley asked, How will we “pass from things natural to spiritual; from the things that are seen to those that are not seen; from the visible to the invisible world? What a gulf is here! By what art will reason get over the immense chasm?”<sup>72</sup> In this way, Wesley framed the ontological scenario for his understanding of the Gospel as the way to spiritual heavenly eternal life. In short, the Gospel is the way in which God’s action bridges our passing from the natural to the spiritual realms of reality.

Wesley thought the knowledge of God was the cure for the soul facing death and hell. “There is a knowledge of God which unveils eternity, and a

<sup>68</sup> “It is a total studied inattention, to the whole invisible and eternal world; more especially to death, the gate of eternity, and to the important consequences of death, — heaven and hell!” Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, 7: 284.

<sup>69</sup> “But what am I? Unquestionably I am something distinct from my body. It seems evident that my body is not necessarily included therein. For when my body dies, I shall not die: I shall exist as really as I did before. And I cannot but believe, this self-moving, thinking principle, with all its passions and affections, will continue to exist, although the body be moldered into dust. Indeed at present this body is so intimately connected with the soul, that I seem to consist of both. In my present state of existence, I undoubtedly consist both of soul and body: And so I shall again, after the resurrection, to all eternity” *Ibid.*, 7 : 246.

<sup>70</sup> “The more reasonable among you have no doubt of this; you do not imagine the whole man dies together; although you hardly suppose the soul, once disengaged, will dwell again in a house of clay. But how will your soul subsist without it? How are you qualified for a separate state? Suppose this earthly covering, this vehicle of organized matter, whereby you hold commerce with the material world, were now to drop off! Now, what would you do in the regions of immortality? You cannot eat or drink there. You cannot indulge either the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eye, or the pride of life. You love only worldly things; and they are gone, fled as smoke, driven away for ever. Here is no possibility of sensual enjoyments; and you have a relish for nothing else. O what a separation is this, from all that you hold dear! What breach is made, never to be healed! But beside this, you are unholy, full of evil tempers; for you did not put off these with the body; you did not leave pride, revenge, malice, envy, discontent, behind you, when you left the world. And now you are no longer cheered by the light of the sun, nor diverted by the flux of various objects; but those dogs of hell are let loose to prey upon your soul, with their whole unrebated strength.” *Ibid.*, 8:208.

<sup>71</sup> “What a great gulf then is fixed between you and happiness, both in this world and that which is to come! Well may you shudder at the thought! more especially when you are about to enter on that untried state of existence. For what a prospect is this, when you stand on the verge of life, ready to launch out into eternity! What can you then think? You see nothing before you. All is dark and dreary.” *Ibid.*, 8:208–09.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 8:16.

love of God which endears it. That knowledge makes the great abyss visible; and all uncertainty vanishes away.”<sup>73</sup> The question is, then, how can we know God from within our material body that hides him from our sight?<sup>74</sup> The answer is that God as Spirit reveals himself to the spirit of human individuals.<sup>75</sup> “This knowledge necessarily generates love<sup>76</sup> and thereby *transfuses more and more of God’s image into the human soul*.<sup>77</sup> As a result, God’s commandments are no longer grievous, but are the very joy of your heart; ways of pleasantness, paths of peace.”<sup>78</sup>

In sum, Wesley affirmed Scripture but used macro hermeneutical principles retrieved from tradition and based on philosophical imagination. In so doing, he fell short from the *sola Scriptura* principle. These methodological principles affect the entire edifice of Christian theology and led Wesley to spiritualize the Gospel and make it stand on a mystical<sup>79</sup> rather than biblical spirituality. This hermeneutical basis explains why Arminianism and Methodism still build on the same Calvinistic tradition.<sup>80</sup>

On this basis, Adventist and Evangelical believers firmly committed to the *sola Scriptura* principle cannot assume Wesley’s teachings properly correspond to biblical thinking and teachings.

### Evangelical Postmodern Turn to Tradition

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, how are evangelical leaders relating to the *sola Scriptura* principle? Are they overcoming the ambiguity of the Reformation? Are they lapsing back to tradition? The answer to these questions is crucial for Adventism because an increasing number of Adventist

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<sup>73</sup> Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, 8:209.

<sup>74</sup> “This veil of flesh now hides him from my sight; and who is able to make it transparent? so that I may perceive, through this glass, God always before me, till I see him ‘face to face.’” Ibid., 8:211.

<sup>75</sup> “And why should this seem a thing incredible to you; that God, a Spirit, and the Father of the spirits of all flesh, should discover himself to your spirit, which is itself ‘the breath of God,’ *divinae particula aerae*; any more than that material things should discover themselves to your material eye? Is it any more repugnant to reason, that spirit should influence spirit, than that matter should influence matter? Nay, is not the former the more intelligible of the two?” Ibid., 8:211.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 8: 212, emphasis provided.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 8: 212.

<sup>79</sup> On Wesley’s mysticism see for instance, Ibid., 7: 343, 51, 93–94.

<sup>80</sup> “He [Wesley] noted that many of them [Protestants] actually knew very little about the revision of Calvinist predestinarianism that Jacob Arminius proposed in the earthy seventeen century.” Gary Dorrien, *The Remaking of Evangelical Theology* (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1998), 168.

leaders feel free to use Evangelical theology and ministerial practices under the assumption that Evangelicals theologians and pastors build their views on Scripture alone. Is this assumption correct in the twenty-first century? Let us turn our attention to some recent developments in American Evangelical leadership.

While many Evangelicals continue to believe the hermeneutical role of Scripture is the methodological watershed that divides Protestantism from Roman Catholicism,<sup>81</sup> by the turn of the twenty-first century the emerging theological and ministerial leadership of American Evangelicalism (the “young evangelicals”) was departing from Scripture and embracing tradition.

Postmodernity has intensified Evangelical ambiguity about the *sola Scriptura* principle. While some evangelical leaders still have affirmed the *sola Scriptura* principle,<sup>82</sup> the cultural and philosophical challenges of postmodernity are leading many others to depart from it. The former correctly believe Christians should interpret Scripture from Scripture (*sola Scriptura*); the latter, incorrectly believe Christians should interpret Scripture from tradition. They are seizing the imagination of young leaders to the point of causing a serious rift in the Evangelical movement<sup>83</sup>.

In postmodern ecumenical times, Evangelical leaders are anxious to overcome their long history of theological divisions<sup>84</sup> that make the very

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<sup>81</sup> “The perduring dividing line between evangelical Protestantism on the one hand and Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy on the other is the enigmatic relation between holy Scripture and holy tradition. The Catholic churches assign tradition a role virtually equivalent to that of Scripture. The final norm for faith is held to reside in Scripture, but tradition communicates and interprets this norm to all generations after Christ. Protestants who adhere to the tenets of the Reformation insist that Scripture interprets itself by the power of the Holy Spirit, and the role of the church is to be obedient to this interpretation. The Reformers upheld *sola scriptura*. Catholics and Orthodox generally affirm Scripture plus tradition as the ultimate authority for faith.” Donald G. Bloesch, *The Church: Sacraments, Worship, Ministry, Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 86.

<sup>82</sup> “We reaffirm the inerrant Scripture to be the sole source of written divine revelation, which alone can bind the conscience. The Bible alone teaches all that is necessary for our salvation from sin and is the standard by which all Christian behavior must be measured. We deny that any creed, council, or individual may bind a Christian’s conscience, that the Holy Spirit speaks independently of or contrary to what is set forth in the Bible, or that personal spiritual experience can ever be a vehicle of revelation. Ibid., 290.

<sup>83</sup> Taylor, “Introduction to Postconservative Evangelicalism.”

<sup>84</sup> “Evangelicals have clashed for centuries over the nature of biblical authority, the authority of the church, the nature of divine predestination, the work of the Holy Spirit, the relation between justification and sanctification, the scope of sanctification, the relation between reason and revelation, and the possibility of fellowship between evangelicals and nonevangelicals.” Dorrien, *The Remaking of Evangelical Theology*, 172–73.

notion of “Evangelicalism” a contested concept,<sup>85</sup> and its very existence questionable. The Fundamentalist and Evangelical coalitions implicitly assume untenable doctrinal diversity and confusion. This plurality originates from their failed attempt to interpret Scripture from the perspective of the *sola Scriptura* principle. This failure validates Roman Catholic prediction that without tradition Christians cannot interpret Scripture correctly or achieve unity. Young Evangelical leaders understand well that in postmodern ecumenical times they must overcome this situation. Are they seeking to overcome it by coming back to Scripture or Roman Catholic tradition? They find them both working in their own theology, spirituality, and ministerial practices.

During the twentieth century, American Evangelical leadership has evolved slowly from Scripture to tradition. From the Neoplatonic/Augustinian/Calvinistic hermeneutical foundation, early in the twentieth century, *Fundamentalism* battled against modernity by the affirmation of verbal inspiration and the inerrancy of Scripture.<sup>86</sup> The apologetical spirit of Fundamentalism did little to advance theological understanding of Christian doctrines from Scripture or overcome Protestant ambiguity about the *sola Scriptura* principle.

By the middle of the century, Billy Graham perhaps became the best-known face of Fundamentalism. Graham led *Traditional Evangelicals* (1950–1975) and gave them national and international recognition through well-known evangelistic crusades based on Scripture and centering on the evangelical interpretation of the Gospel. Fundamentalism and evangelistic crusades, however, did little to overcome Protestant ambiguity about the *sola Scriptura* principle, which continued to lurk in the methodological basis of evangelical theology and ministry.

During the last quarter of the twentieth century, Mill Hybels’ (Willow Creek) adaptation of liturgical forms to contemporary culture in the megachurch context brought *Pragmatic Evangelicals* to prominence. Liturgical pragmatism, that young evangelical leadership found, not in Scripture, but in the tradition of the church and the religions of the world,

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<sup>85</sup> “The ample disagreements that divide modern evangelicals confirm that ‘evangelicalism’ is an inherently contested concept. Its meaning cannot be defined precisely, because it is claimed by groups that bear fundamental differences from one another in the ways in which they define themselves.” Dorrien, *The Remaking of Evangelical Theology*, 169.

<sup>86</sup> James Barr, “Fundamentalism,” in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, ed. Erwin Fahlbusch, and Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999–2003) 2:363.

created a theological and spiritual vacuum. Deep changes in theological and ministerial patterns were taking place serendipitously during this period in the young generation of Evangelical. They are transforming Evangelical leaders and Evangelicalism in ways we can only adumbrate. Also for practical reasons, a sizable number of representative Adventist leaders felt compelled to adapt Adventist liturgy to contemporary culture thereby intensifying the secularization of the Adventist mind and lifestyle. While not turning explicitly to tradition, many Adventist leaders drifted away from Scripture as the ground for theological and ministerial thinking. Biblical and doctrinal illiteracy intensified in Adventist leaders and lay members.

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, young evangelical leaders came to prominence and began to exercise influence in the community at large. The new period is underway and observers label it in various ways, for instance, “Younger Evangelicals,” “Post-Conservatism,” and the “Emerging Church” (2000 and beyond).<sup>87</sup> Notable leaders in the movement are the late Stanley Grenz (theoretical and doctrinal theology),<sup>88</sup> Brian McLaren (practical theology),<sup>89</sup> and Robert Webber (Liturgy).<sup>90</sup>

The Emergent Church decidedly embraces ecumenism and postmodernity. They believe the Protestant Reformation is over and a new spiritual, pluralistic, ecumenical reformation based on tradition is underway. Emerging Church leadership decidedly overcomes Protestant ambiguity on the *sola Scriptura* principle by explicitly affirming that the “sources of theology include not only the Bible, but also Christian tradition, culture, and the contemporary experience of God’s community.”<sup>91</sup>

Although renowned Evangelical theologian Donald Bloesch affirmed the *sola Scriptura* principle theoretically in 2002,<sup>92</sup> twenty five years earlier he joined Emergent Church leader Robert E. Webber in “a conference of

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<sup>87</sup> Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals: Facing the Challenges of the New World*, 21. For a concise introduction to Evangelical post conservatism see Taylor, “Introduction to Postconservative Evangelicalism,” 17–32.

<sup>88</sup> See for instance, Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1994); Stanley Grenz, and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001).

<sup>89</sup> See for instance, McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*; Brian D. McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus Christ: Uncovering the Truth That Could Change Everything* (Nashville, TN: W Publishing Group, 2006).

<sup>90</sup> See for instance, Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World*.

<sup>91</sup> Taylor, “Introduction to Postconservative Evangelicalism,” 19.

<sup>92</sup> See footnotes 82 and 84.

evangelical leaders and scholars that issued an appeal, known as the Chicago Call, for a more catholic and historically rooted evangelicalism... It called for a new evangelical movement that affirmed the historic creeds, sacraments, and ecclesial ethos of classical Christianity.”<sup>93</sup> Postconservative Evangelicals, then “argued that Luther and Calvin belonged to the great tradition of classical Christian orthodoxy, and that the hope of a genuinely catholic evangelicalism lies in the modern evangelical recovery of the catholic elements<sup>94</sup> in Lutheran and Calvinist Christianity.”<sup>95</sup>

Yet, not all Evangelical leaders embrace the Emergent Church turn to tradition. Recognizing that tradition has been wrong many times and cannot be implicitly trusted <sup>96</sup> conservative traditional Evangelical leaders continue to embrace the Reformation *sola Scriptura* principle, and its built-in ambivalence on tradition. Pastors, leaders, scholars, writers, and seminary professors of established main line Protestant and Evangelical denominations, build their theologies assuming the Roman Catholic multiple sources of theology principle and use Catholic tradition, philosophy, and science, as macro hermeneutical principles to understand Scripture and construct Christian doctrines.

In short, on one side, Emergent Church neoconservative Evangelical leadership openly embraces Roman Catholic tradition and religious pluralism. On another side, Conservative Evangelical scholars and leaders implicitly assume that Protestant theologies cannot stand based on the *sola*

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<sup>93</sup> Dorrien, *The Remaking of Evangelical Theology*, 170. “The Chicago Call was issued in the form of an eight-point manifesto that urged evangelicals to affirm the roots and catholic heritage of Christianity, the authority of scripture, the identity-conferring authority of the historic creed, the holistic character of salvation, the value of sacramental practices and theology the centrality of Christ’s redemptive work to Christian spirituality, the need for church authority, and the hope of Christian unity.” (Ibid.).

<sup>94</sup> Roman Catholic theologian Hans Küng recognized the existence of a underlying continuity between macro theological schools of Christian theology through the centuries. “Elements of the old paradigm can be taken over into the new paradigm, unless they contract the primal, basic testimony. In this way steps have been taken in advance so that, not only between Origen and Augustine, but also between Augustine and Thomas, and even between Thomas and Luther, an Upheaval does not lead to a total break; what happens, rather, is that with the common bond of Christian faith a certain amount of common theological ground is also preserved.” Hans Küng, *Theology for the Third Millennium: An Ecumenical View*, trans. Peter Heinegg (New York: Doubleday, 1988), 158.

<sup>95</sup> Dorrien, *The Remaking of Evangelical Theology*, 171.

<sup>96</sup> “The creeds are often wrong, ... The Nicene Creed contains Origenist concepts; Chalcedon conferred on Mary the title ‘Mother of God’; the Fourth Lateran Council endorsed Cyprian’s dictum that outside the church there is no salvation; the Augsburg Confession prescribes the Eucharistic doctrine of consubstantiation; the Marburg Articles teach baptismal regeneration; and the Westminster Confession identifies the pope as the Antichrist.” Ibid.



*Scriptura* principle. The difference between the two competing branches of Evangelical leadership is not qualitative but quantitative. The difference, then, revolves around how much church tradition, philosophy, science, and experience as hermeneutical principles to interpret Scripture and construct Christian theology is permissible for Evangelicals.

As they relate to Evangelical theology and ministerial practices, Adventist leadership should keep in mind the Emergent Church's explicit turn to tradition and the implicit hermeneutical role of tradition in conservative evangelical thinking. Moreover, they should realize also the existence of a "hermeneutical gap" dividing Evangelical leaders from church members.

### **The Two Protestant Worlds**

To assess properly the way in which Adventism relates to Protestantism we need to distinguish carefully between two Protestant worlds (methodological context) and, become aware from which level Adventism came into existence (historical context).

Evangelical theologian John Sanders recognized correctly that when Evangelicals believers become "theologically informed" they come to understand Scripture in a different way.<sup>97</sup> What causes the difference between lay and scholarly theologies? While the former flows from Scripture texts and canonical context, the second flows from Scripture and tradition as vehicle of other extra biblical contexts (philosophy, science, experience). We can infer, then, that there is a significant hermeneutical gap between the world of theologically well-informed Evangelicals and the world of Evangelical church members. The earlier uses Church tradition as source of its macro hermeneutical principles to understand Scripture and Christian doctrines; the latter claims to build on Scripture alone.

Thus, Evangelicalism conceals a fateful foundational division between their own ranks. On one hand, the world of lay believers strongly assumes their beliefs and well-informed leaders squarely stand on Scripture alone. On the other hand, explicitly or implicitly, knowingly or unknowingly, the world of Evangelical well-informed theologians, writers, and pastors do not stand on Scripture alone but on Scripture and tradition. Adventism also hides within its own ranks the same dichotomy between the worlds of laity and

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<sup>97</sup> John Sanders, "Historical Considerations," in *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*, ed. Clark Pinnock et al. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 59.

leadership. The Emergent Remnant springs from Adventist and Evangelical laities committed to the *sola Scriptura* principle.

### Conclusions

In this study, we explored the role that the *sola Scriptura* principle plays in Evangelical theological methodology in order to assess whether Evangelical theology and ministerial practices are automatically compatible with Adventist theology. To answer this overall question we asked, do Evangelical doctrines stand only on Scripture so that Adventists can continue to use them as faithful expressions of their beliefs? Alternatively, do Evangelical doctrines stand on tradition and Scripture?

The brief and incomplete survey of evidence we considered in this study suggests the following conclusions. Adventists correctly recognize that the *sola Scriptura* principle originates with Luther and the early reformation movement, and incorrectly assume that the Magisterial Reformers (Luther and Calvin) developed their theologies by consistently applying the *sola Scriptura* principle. They believe these views find support in Ellen White's positive description of Luther's pivotal role in the Great Controversy. However, although Ellen White highly praised Luther for his use of Scripture against tradition she did not endorse his theology because there were many important truths yet to be discovered.

Luther affirmed and partially used the *sola Scriptura* principle. Yet, he did not follow it consistently because explicitly and implicitly he still gave a guiding hermeneutical role to tradition, notably to Augustine. Besides, Luther did not abide by the *tota Scriptura* principle choosing to value the portions of Scripture that better fitted his theological interpretation of justification by faith.

The Belgic Confession, the Canons of Dort, and the Formula of Concord, speak about the role of Scripture and its relation to Christian tradition along the same lines established by the Reformers. Tradition and its Greek philosophical assumptions became the implicit hermeneutical context from which Protestants interpreted Scripture and constructed their teachings and practices.

John Wesley did not alter the pattern established by the Magisterial Reformers and the confessions of faith. While he affirmed Scripture, Wesley also used macro hermeneutical principles retrieved from tradition and based on philosophical imagination. In so doing, he fell short from the *sola Scriptura* principle.

During the twentieth century, American Evangelical leaders retained the traditional Protestant ambivalence on the *sola Scriptura* principle. Implicitly, they continued to embrace tradition and its implicit philosophical assumptions as did Luther, the Protestant Confessions, John Wesley, and Methodism.

By the end of the twentieth century, the advent of postmodernity and Roman Catholic aggressive Ecumenical Evangelization unleashed by Vatican II prompted young Evangelical leaders to reassess their ministerial patterns and theological positions. As a result, at the turn of the twenty-first century, an increasing number of Evangelical leaders are turning for inspiration and guidance to Roman Catholic tradition and world religions instead that turning to Scripture. Yet, we can still find a remnant within Evangelical denominations of believers still committed to the *sola Scriptura* principle. Unfortunately, their doctrines and practices continue to stand on tradition and non-biblical philosophical hermeneutics.

These findings should help Adventist and biblically grounded Evangelicals to realize that the Protestant Reformation was not about restoring biblical thinking but about restoring “the ancient catholicity of the church.”<sup>98</sup> Tradition is the ground from which the Emerging Church emerges.

The consistent neglect of Magisterial Reformers, Protestant tradition, and Evangelical authors to subject the fathers’ philosophical assumptions to biblical criticism becomes the point on which the *sola Scriptura* principle stands or falls. We should keep this in mind because Adventism stands or falls on the faithful application of the *sola Scriptura* principle.

We can now answer the questions formulated in the introduction. Do Evangelical doctrines stand only on Scripture so that Adventists can continue to use them as faithful expressions of their beliefs? The answer to this question is that Protestant and Evangelical theologies and ministerial paradigms never stood on Scripture alone. Moreover, during the last thirty years, Evangelical Leadership in America has decisively turned to Roman Catholic tradition and moved away from Scripture alone.

Adventist and Evangelical believers firmly committed to the *sola Scriptura* principle should not assume any longer that theologies and ministerial paradigms of Protestant and Evangelical authors correspond to biblical thinking and teachings. Instead, they should emulate Luther’s

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<sup>98</sup> Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition*, 201.

methodological use of Scripture to deconstruct tradition and apply suspicion to all Protestant and Evangelical theologies and ministerial practices.

Consequently, Adventists should not continue to assume that Protestant and Evangelical theologies and ministerial practices are compatible with the *sola-tota-prima Scriptura* principle and with Adventist theology. As a forgotten task, the Biblical Reformation of the Church lies still in the future. Scripture is the ground from which the Emerging Remnant should continue to emerge until Jesus Christ our Lord comes again.